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ABSTRACT

Empathy and prosocial moral values are often identified as antecedents of helping behavior, but interest in their relationship and joint operation has only recently emerged. To investigate the relative contribution of empathy and values to helping responses, 87 college students were confronted with a request for help delivered either in person or by written note. The results showed the helping behavior in the "live appeal" condition was a function of students' prosocial value orientation, but not of their level of dispositional empathy. Conversely, dispositional empathy was the sole determinant of helping in the "written appeal" condition. The findings are consistent with a conception of empathic emotion as an "activator" of helping responses and of values as "facilitators" channeling response tendencies triggered by empathic arousal, and suggest that further research is in order to reverify the respective roles of empathy and values in producing prosocial behavior. (JAC)

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Antecedents of Helping:

Assessing the Role of Empathy and Values

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Two factors that have been frequently identified in the literature as antecedents of helping behavior have been feelings of empathy (e.g., Anderman & Berkowitz, 1970; Aronfreed & Paskal, cited in Aronfreed, 1970; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Krebs, 1975; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) and prosocial moral values (e.g., McNamee, 1972; Schwartz et al., 1969; Staub, 1974).[1] However, interest in the joint operation of these two factors, and in the possible relationships between them, has emerged only recently. Staub (1978) notes that "the distinction that has been traditionally maintained between empathy and values is probably unjustified..." (Staub, 1978, p. 45). In a developmental context, Eisenberg-Berg and Neal (1979) have argued that "needs-oriented" moral reasoning among preschoolers (referring to another's needs as a justification for behavior) may represent a form of empathic concern. However, the implications of an empathy-value connection have yet to be thoroughly explored. The present study is intended as a first step in that direction.

Following the lead of Staub (1978), we would expect that susceptibility to empathic emotion would be positively related to a prosocial value orientation. Yet we would not expect that dispositional empathy and prosocial values would operate jointly to produce helping behavior in all situations, as in a simple additive model. Rather, we would predict that empathy, since it involves an arousal component (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Stotland, 1969) would be sufficient to motivate a helping response under ordinary conditions. This means that, for the individual who is high on dispositional empathy, the perception of need should "trigger" empathic emotion, which in turn should lead to helping. In contrast,

prosocial values or standards are assumed to be relatively "cool" cognitions (Zajonc, 1980) with little/no motivating properties. We would not expect such values to directly energize a helping response. Rather, they may play a more prominent role in helping situations where dispositional empathy is superfluous - i.e., where the situation itself generates an empathic emotional response in most persons. Here the arousal state that motivates empathy-induced helping would be present in both high and low empathics and we would not expect differences in helping between these two groups. However, the presence/absence of personal values related to helping should be predictive of incremental helping in this setting. The presence of these values would serve to channel-- in a prosocial direction-- the response tendencies that have been activated by empathic arousal. Absence of these values ("facilitators") would lead to somewhat lower levels of prosocial responding.

To test these predictions, individual subjects (pretested on dispositional empathy and prosocial values) were presented with an "appeal for help" that was delivered either in person or via a written note delivered by the experimenter. This manipulation was designed to vary the level of situationally-induced empathy. It has previously been demonstrated (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) that empathic emotion is differentially activated by the physical presence/absence of the target person. Thus we would expect this manipulation to affect the relative contribution of dispositional empathy and prosocial values to subjects' helping behavior, in line with the model proposed above.

Method

Pretest

A total of 270 male undergraduates from UT/Austin were pretested on

measures of dispositional empathy and prosocial values. The empathy items had been selected from the Mehrabian-Epstein (1972) empathy scale and were designed to measure both empathic concern and personal distress.[2] The values scale (adapted from Scott, 1965) consisted of statements reflecting personal values or ideals relating to helping behaviors. Subjects were asked to indicate whether they apply the standard to themselves "always," "never," or "depending on the situation."

A factor analysis of empathy scale responses, employing the PA1 option from the SPSS program package (Nie et al., 1975), yielded a 5-item empathic concern factor. These items constituted our empathic concern index ($\alpha = .63$). A prosocial values index consisting of 11 items ($\alpha = .73$) was likewise retained for use as a predictor in the main experiment.

Main Experiment

A total of 87 males (drawn from our larger pretest sample) participated as subjects in the main experiment. Subjects were run individually by a single male experimenter (E), who was kept blind to subjects' pretest scores. E introduced the study as a "social judgment" task. Before beginning the task, the subject was asked to consider a request from a graduate student from another department who was having trouble getting volunteers for a research project.

For half the subjects (those assigned to the live appeal condition), E introduced a female confederate as the "student." E then left the room while the confederate presented the help appeal orally to the subject. The confederate then gave the subject a 2-page response form to complete. This form contained the major dependent measure of amount of time volunteered (in units of 30 minutes), as well as the manipulation check items. The

confederate collected the completed form from the subject and then left.

For the other half of the subjects (those in the written appeal condition), the help request was delivered as a written note presented by E. In this condition, E explained that "(confederate) was unable to come in person today." The help appeal note was identical in content to the confederate's oral presentation in the live appeal condition. The note was followed by the same 2-page response form described above, and was handed out and collected by E.

All subjects were then given the previously mentioned "social judgment" task by E (these data were being collected by one of the authors for purposes unrelated to the present study). After completing this task, all subjects were thoroughly debriefed by E.

Results

Effectiveness of the appeal manipulation. The appeal manipulation was designed to create the two conditions necessary to test our proposed model--i.e., one in which empathic responding would be a function of subjects' own dispositional tendencies (written appeal) vs. a product of the helping situation (live appeal). Accordingly, an analysis of the empathy manipulation check item ("To what extent did you identify with the feelings of the person who asked you for help?") within each of the two appeal conditions was conducted via simple regression, using subjects' empathic concern scores as the predictor. As expected, empathic concern emerged as a significant predictor of subjects' reported level of empathic emotion in the written appeal condition, $F(1,40) = 7.52$, $p = .009$, but not in the live appeal condition ($F < 1$). Analysis of the two other manipulation check items (perceived legitimacy and perceived importance of the student's request) revealed no

significant effect of the appeal manipulation (both Fs < 1).

Effectiveness of the predictor variables on helping. The major analysis performed used the multiple regression program from the SPSS package (Nie et al., 1975) with two continuous variables-- empathic concern and prosocial values-- and the dichotomous variable of appeal condition as predictors. The multiple regression performed on the helping measure yielded a significant main effect only for empathic concern, $F(1,75) = 4.88$, $p = .030$. A significant interaction was found between prosocial values and appeal condition, $F(1,75) = 4.46$, $p < .04$ (see Table 1). Subjects high in prosocial values offered more help in the live appeal than in the written appeal condition, $F(1,75) = 4.69$, $p < .05$, but this did not occur among subjects low in prosocial values. Also, within the live appeal condition only, subjects high in prosocial values tended to help more than their low prosocial counterparts, $F(1,75) = 3.43$, $p < .08$. The multiple regression analysis also revealed a significant 2-way interaction between empathic concern and appeal condition, $F(1,75) = 10.71$, $p = .002$. Despite the moderate correlation between values and empathic concern in our subject sample (.38, $p = .001$), the form of this interaction (as depicted in Table 2) did not parallel the values x appeal condition pattern. The significant contrasts here were as follows: (a) among subjects low in empathic concern, more help was offered in the live appeal condition than in the written appeal condition, $F(1,75) = 4.98$, $p < .05$, and (b) within the written appeal group only, subjects high in empathic concern gave more help than low empathic subjects, $F(1,75) = 11.32$, $p < .005$. In addition, the multiple regression revealed a borderline interaction between empathic concern and prosocial values, $F(1,75) = 3.09$, $p < .09$. This was due to the (non-significant) tendency for prosocial values

to increase helping behavior among high empathics but not among lows (see Table 3). The 3-way (appeal x concern x values) interaction tested by the multiple regression analysis did not approach significance ($F < 1$).

Discussion

Our hypothesis here stated that dispositional empathy would predict helping behavior in an affectively neutral situation, while prosocial values would mediate incremental helping in a more affectively charged (empathy-inducing) situation. The results from the present study provide strong support for this hypothesis. In the written appeal condition, differential activation of empathic emotion between high and low empathic individuals lead to differential helping between these two groups, with no effect for prosocial values. In contrast, the live appeal condition generated comparable (high) levels of empathic responding from both high and low empathics. In this situation, a prosocial value orientation was predictive of the amount of helping offered.

This evidence is consistent with a conception of empathic emotion as an "activator" of helping responses and of values as "facilitators" channeling or directing response tendencies that have been triggered by empathic arousal. The inability of prosocial values to operate autonomously in producing helping is a striking but unavoidable conclusion here, based on (a) the absence of a significant main effect for values in the multiple regression, (b) the tendency for values to increase helping only among high empathic individuals, and (c) most importantly, the demonstration that values are not invoked in the absence of an affectively charged need situation (here, a personal appeal for help). These qualifiers would seem

to render values in a secondary/subsidiary role vis-a-vis empathy as a determinant of prosocial behavior. However, the evidence here appears to favor this view, in contrast to either an additive model (i.e., one implying equal status for both factors) or a more cognitive approach in which values form an interpretive framework for labeling experienced arousal as "empathy." Support for the latter position was lacking here, due to the clear absence of a main effect for values on our helping measure.

Further research is needed in order to verify the respective roles of empathy and values in producing prosocial behavior. This could involve alternative ways of inducing situational empathy and/or other measures of dispositional empathy and prosocial values. It would also be interesting to test the impact of other forms of arousal on the invoking of helping-related values (perhaps using a misattribution of arousal paradigm). Further research is also needed to clarify a rather puzzling trend that appeared in our data: namely, the tendency for empathic concern to be negatively related to the amount of help offered within the low values/live appeal cell of our design. One possibility here is that, in the absence of prosocial values, empathic emotion may activate certain negative ("anti-social") response tendencies. Our data do not allow us to distinguish between this explanation and a Hullian (1943, 1952) drive x habit interpretation, based on (a) the heightened arousal state of high vs. low empathics in this condition, coupled with (b) the nondominant position of helping behaviors in the response hierarchy of these low prosocial individuals.

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Footnotes

[1]Our use of the term "moral" here derives from Staub's definition of morality as "values that carry a sense of obligation" (Staub, 1978, p. 11). We want to make clear at the outset that we regard personal standards related to helping in this context, and that the prefix "moral" should be implicit in our discussion of personal standards/values that follows.

[2]Our inclusion of items tapping both empathic concern and personal distress was prompted by our reading of the empathy literature, where both factors have been acknowledged as constituents of empathic emotion (e.g., Archer et al., 1981; Batson et al., 1981; Coke et al., 1978). After a preliminary analysis of our experimental results, we decided to omit further consideration of personal distress, since it was not a significant factor in subjects' helping responses. We note in passing that, unlike empathic concern, personal distress was only weakly related to prosocial values in our subject sample ($r = .14$, $p < .11$).

Table 1

Mean help volunteered for subjects above and below the median in prosocial values in each condition

	Prosocial Values	
Condition	Low	High
Written appeal	1.91	1.58
	(22)	(19)
Live appeal	1.68	2.39
	(19)	(23)

Note. The helping measure is expressed in units of 30 minutes (no help = 0, 30 min. help = 1, etc.). Cell sizes are given in parentheses.

Table 2

Mean help volunteered for subjects above and below the median in empathic concern in each condition

	Empathic Concern	
Condition	Low	High
Written appeal	1.28	2.13
	(18)	(23)
Live appeal	2.14	2.00
	(22)	(20)

Note. The helping measure is expressed in units of 30 minutes (no help = 0, 30 min. help = 1, etc.). Cell sizes are given in parentheses.

Table 3

Mean help volunteered for subjects above and below the median in prosocial values and empathic concern

		Prosocial Values	
		Low	High
Empathic concern	Low	1.75 (24)	1.75 (16)
	High	1.88 (17)	2.19 (26)

Note. The helping measure is expressed in units of 30 minutes (no help = 0, 30 min. help = 1, etc.). Cell sizes are given in parentheses.